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Digital Media and Youth Suicide: Analysis of Media Reporting on "Blue Whale" Case

Patricia Sonsoles Sánchez-Muros
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8129-5511
sonsoles@ugr.es
Universidad de Granada

María Luisa Jiménez Rodrigo
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4635-7713
mluisajimenez@ugr.es
Universidad de Granada

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Abstract

The media play an important role in suicide prevention, which has led to the development of media guidelines for reporting on suicides. Engagement with such recommendations is analysed here. A case study has been conducted of the "Blue Whale Challenge," an Internet "game" related to self-harm among adolescents, and the public alarm triggered by the related media coverage. Quantitative and qualitative content analysis was carried out of the news stories published in Spain by the mainstream digital media in 2017. The findings indicate the widespread presence of malpractice (sensationalist language and detailed descriptions of methods), which may contribute to copycatting and indicate poor compliance with international guidelines on best practice (such as providing information on reliable and contextualised help resources available). These results underscore the importance of including the role and function of the media in the prevention of this public health problem.

Keywords

Suicide, media electronic, youth mental health, content analysis, internet, Spain.

1. Introduction

Suicide is recognized by the World Health Organization as one of the biggest public health problems today. There are approximately 800,000 suicides a year worldwide, representing a standardized annual rate of 11.4 suicides per 100,000 inhabitants (15 among men and 8 among women) (WHO, 2014). Nearly 80% of suicides occur in low- and middle-income countries. Suicide makes the 18th leading cause of death worldwide in 2016. Europe, after Southeast Asia, is one of the most affected areas, with a rate of 12 suicides per 100,000 inhabitants (increasing drastically in the case of men with a rate of 20 per 100,000 compared to the rate for women of 4.9) (WHO, 2014). The prevalence of suicidal behaviour, that is, ideas, acts and attempts – the main indication of risk– is even greater than suicide in itself. It is estimated that for each suicide that occurs, there are 20 attempt (WHO, 2019). This indicates that suicidal behaviour is largely hidden, at least from the medical services.

Adolescents and young people are an important risk group, with suicide being the second leading cause of death, in a growing trend, in those aged between 15 and 29 years worldwide and, although in global terms the crude suicide mortality rate has declined worldwide in the decade 2010–2020, in the adolescent population it has continued to increase (WHO, 2020). In Spain, in 2016, almost ten people died a day from suicide, at a rate of 7.7 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants (11.4 among men, and 3.8 among women) (INE, 2019). Particularly targeting the

adolescent population, a total of 268 suicides (75.7% of men) were recorded in 2018 amongst under 29s (INE, 2019). Studies characterising adolescent suicide in Spain (Pérez Camarero, 2009), point out that males aged between 20 and 29 years, suffer suicide rates three times higher than those of adolescents and four times higher than females.

The adolescent and youth population is a particularly vulnerable group because of their lack of psychological resources and coping mechanisms in the face of traumatic situations (Navarro-Gómez, 2017). Furthermore, in addressing adolescent suicide, it is necessary to take into account the important role of the Internet and social media, since, on the one hand, they facilitate access to models and methods of self-harm and suicide, and on the other, they provide new methods of discrimination, violence and virtual harassment that increase the risk of suicidal behaviour among adolescents. Digital forms of communication and interaction are thus giving rise to new social phenomena, such as cyber-suicide, which alerts us to the potential of the Internet to influence those wanting to share their suicidal ideas with others (Alao *et al.*, 2016; Baume *et al.*, 1997; Daine *et al.*, 2013). The specific vulnerability of young people to the influence of the media and Internet on representations of suicide has been evidenced in several studies (Auxéméry & Fidelle, 2010; Ayers *et al.*, 2017; Padmanathan *et al.*, 2016; Tam *et al.*, 2007).

Additionally, studies have shown that peer modelling of suicidal behaviours can also play a role in the diffusion of suicide among youth (Abrutyn & Mueller, 2014; Mueller, 2017; Mueller & Abrutyn, 2015). Even now it has been well documented that victims of cyberbullying and school bullying had a significantly higher risk of suicidal ideations, plans and attempts (Zaborskis *et al.*, 2019). In short, digital self-harm is a new problem that demands additional scholarly attention. Thus, as argued by Patchin and Hinduja "a deeper inquiry as to the motivations behind this behaviour, and how it correlates to offline self-harm and suicidal ideation, can help direct mental health professionals toward informed prevention approaches" (Patchin & Hinduja, 2017, p. 761).

According to the World Health Organization, the prevention of suicide is a global imperative, and the media play an essential role in strategies of suicide prevention (WHO, 2014). However, the issue of suicide is taboo, generating extensive debate and controversy with regard to media responsibility and how it reports (or not) on cases of suicide (Olmo López & García Fernández, 2015). Media can play a significant role in either enhancing or weakening suicide prevention efforts. Some media contents are associated with an increase in suicide, it is called Werther effect (Phillips, 1974). Conversely, when others contents and strategies to report suicides are associated with its decrease, it is called the Papageno effect (Niederkrotenthaler *et al.*, 2010).

As Durkheim pointed out, "the individual is dominated by a moral reality that surpasses him or her: the collective reality" (1985, p. 6). Analysis of historical data (1910-2011) on suicide rates in Spain still holds many of the Durkheim's hypotheses proposed a century ago (Barricarte *et al.*, 2017). Suicide is, above all, a social fact and therefore is subjected to real forces that eventually impose themselves. In that sense, beliefs about suicide are not universal; they depend on cultural and social factors. For this reason, Werther effect, may be seen more strongly in vulnerable populations, as suggested by Muller: "*suggestive effect* on vulnerable people who then imitate the publicized suicide" (Haw, Hawton, Niedzwiedz & Platt, 2013, cited in Mueller, 2017, p. 153). In the same vein, the protective effect (Papageno effect) may be more effective if targeted at a certain population through their native information channels. The gatekeeper role of journalists and media professionals is crucial for this social construction of suicide, and particularly digital media for adolescent populations, forming part of the most necessary and efficient preventive strategies (Mann *et al.*, 2005). Mueller (2017) illustrates how the media in the US crafted a particular story about why youth die by suicide that emphasized academic pressure over other plausible causes. In so doing, the media may have broadened ideas about when suicide is seen as an option.

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However, she also provides evidence that cautions against attributing too much causal power to the media. The media may have helped solidify a certain view of suicide in the community, especially those cases whose deaths are newsworthy (Mueller, 2017).

International health institutions have sounded a warning about the negative effects that inadequate information on suicide may have, leading to its increase among the most vulnerable sections of population, through a copycat imitation effect (Blood *et al.*, 2001; Pirkis *et al.*, 2002; Sisask *et al.*, 2012; Steven Stack, 2005; Yang, Tsai, Yang, Shia, Fush *et al.*, 2013). Special attention must be paid to research on how news is spread through social media such as Twitter (Fahey *et al.*, 2018; Ueda *et al.*, 2017). Other studies of suicide searches on the internet has found some support for the impact of celebrity status on the likelihood of Werther and Papageno effects occurring (Gunn *et al.*, 2020; Myhre & Walby, 2021). Seeking the Papageno effect it can be concluded that, improving information on and representations of suicide in the media, advertising campaigns, information on telephone helplines, on-line resources to promote positive mental health and protecting younger groups from their potentially harmful effects, may help to educate the public about suicide and its prevention.

The aim of this study is to analyse the way digital media cover suicide and evaluate the degree of adherence to the main recommendations issued by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2017), and contained in the EUREGENAS project[1] (Dumon & Portzky, 2013). In order to do this, we have selected the case of the "Blue Whale Challenge" (hereinafter, BWC), disseminated through the Internet and social media, which led to widespread social alarm in Spain when the media relayed adolescent suicidal behaviour, and even obtained information about cases of attempted self-harm attributed to the "game." This virtual "game" involved overcoming various "challenges" focused on self-harm, culminating in suicide.

The BWC is part of a wider set of online suicide games that have attracted a great deal of media attention around the world, which has led to research into the role of the media in the dissemination of viral information on social networks and digital media (Stack, 2005; Sumner *et al.*, 2019) contributing to social alarm and a possible contagion effect among the adolescent population (Khattar *et al.*, 2018; Lupariello *et al.*, 2019). BWC is a global viral phenomenon, which began in 2014 in Russia, spread to the United States in 2015 and, throughout 2016 and 2017, spread around the world. (Sumner *et al.*, 2019). The BWC generated intense social alarm because of its possible effects on the adolescent population, which prompted warnings from police and school officials (Storm, 2017). In Spain, the BWC also had a great media impact, when in March 2017 the first news began to arrive and spread in the media, causing alarm among families and schools. Various cases of self-harm and suicides among adolescents were reported, which were investigated by the Spanish police and public prosecutor's office. Finally, the media impact and social alarm began to dissipate in mid-2017, and many of these reports disseminated by the digital press as fake news were dismantled.

The first reason this case was chosen is because of the media relevance and social alarm generated that led to the involvement of security forces, education centres and health professionals. The second reason is because of its relationship with the use of the Internet and social media in the dissemination of suicidal behaviour and ideas among the adolescent population. The press analysis, as an important legitimised agent of public opinion construction. It allows us to establish the hypothesis that the social construction of public opinion is supported by mechanisms for the production and dissemination of certain collective representations on suicide, and their degree of adaptation to international health recommendations. From this case study, we will be able to assess whether the digital media reproduce bad practices that contribute to feeding alarms and moral panics among the population (Walsh, 2020) or, on the contrary, whether their messages contribute to the prevention of suicidal behaviour in line with international best practice recommendations

[1] Second Programme of Community Action in Health in Europe.

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(Dumon & Portzky, 2013; WHO, 2017). These elements make the BWC phenomenon a particularly relevant case for analysis and reflection on the role of the media in the treatment and prevention of suicide.

2. Suicide and media reporting: International recommendations

Various instruments and guidelines have been developed that seek to provide guidance on how to adequately inform people about suicide (Sisask *et al.*, 2012). Some of the main recommendations aimed at the media to improve suicide reports have been collected in major research endeavours (Hawton *et al.*, 2012; Portzky & van Heeringen, 2006).

The World Health Organization Instrument developed a resource for media professionals (WHO, 2017), the result of work carried out by the SUPRE program. It constitutes a worldwide reference initiative for suicide prevention. This tool contains recommendations on how to avoid news sensationalism, detailed descriptions, simplistic explanations, the presentation of suicide as a logical solution to problems, as well as how to avert an impact on family members and the glorification of victims. It also includes the need to show the harmful consequences of attempts and, finally, to provide information on available resources, alarm signals and greater support for victims. These guidelines have been updated and also contain recommendations for digital media (WHO, 2017). Digital media (online newspapers, print newspapers' websites, films, television soap operas or stage plays) can spread the information very quickly. For this reason, specific recommendations (such as avoiding hyperlinking, video or audio, data visualizations and introducing adequate policies to moderate comments sections) are also included (WHO, 2017).

Another essential guide is the Samaritans' *Media Guidelines for Reporting Suicide* (Samaritans, 2013), a leading British organization, traditionally dedicated to caring for victims of attempted suicide, whose code of practice has been a vital part of their work with the media for two decades (2013 is the fifth edition published). This code has also been evaluated, and the conclusion was that none of the online news about suicides in the United Kingdom met the criteria set out in the guide (Utterson *et al.*, 2017).

Given the importance accorded to the media in the prevention of suicide, Spain has participated in the design of its own tool for media professionals within the framework of the *European Regions Enforcing Actions against Suicide* (EUREGENAS) (Dumon & Portzky, 2013). This instrument, based on the recommendations of the WHO (WHO, 2000), synthesizes in a practical way those factors that journalists should take into account. The EUREGENAS project is aimed at contributing to the prevention of suicidal thoughts and behaviour in Europe through the development and implementation of strategies at regional levels which could be of use as examples of good practice. The project brought together 15 European partners representing 11 European Regions with diverse experiences in suicide prevention (Italy, Belgium, Sweden, Romania, Finland, Spain, Germany, Slovenia, and United Kingdom). This instrument synthesizes, in a practical way, factors that should be taken into account by journalists, especially the print media, specifying what not to do (malpractice) –because of the important imitative triggers, especially among vulnerable populations–, and what to do (best practice) to promote preventive effects. A summary of the main recommendations included in the WHO and EUREGENAS guidelines can be seen in Table 1.

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Table 1: Main guides to promote responsible reporting of suicide in the media.

Quick reference guide WHO (2000/2017)	**Main recommendations EUREGENAS (2014)**
DO'S	
Provide accurate information about where to seek help	· Refer to support services (provide information referring to a helpline, website or help centre for people in need…).
Educate the public about the facts of suicide and suicide prevention, without spreading myths	· Provide the right numbers and stay with the facts (present the data objectively; distinguish between fatal suicide and ideation or attempt; check with regional/national experts and websites on suicide prevention to make sure you use the right terminology). · When reporting figures or numbers, use reliable sources and put the numbers in the right context.
Report stories of how to cope with life stressors or suicidal thoughts, and how to get help	· Stress that suicide can be preventable. · Stress that suicide is multifactorial, explaining the complexity (many causes, emphasize the differences between causes and triggers).
Apply particular caution when reporting celebrity suicides	· Have extra caution (revealing details) when reporting on the suicide of a celebrity
Apply caution when interviewing bereaved family or friends	· Respect the feelings of the people bereaved by suicide (family survivors and relatives). Protect this vulnerable group and to respect their wishes and privacy and the privacy of their relatives.
DON'TS	
Don't place stories about suicide prominently and don't unduly repeat such stories	· DON'T place the new item in a prominent place (on frontpage, headlines or on top of the website).
Don't use sensational headlines	· DON'T place the word (Suicide or Attempt o) in a prominent place of the news.
Don't use language which sensationalizes headlines	· Avoid dramatic and sensationalist language. · DON'T Normalizing suicide (when presenting suicide as a normal and understandable solution to stressful life events). · Dispel myths (for example, suicide cannot be prevented; people who talk about suicide will not attempt suicide…
Don't explicitly describe the method used Don't provide details about the site/location	· Have extra caution when reporting on an unusual suicide (such as those making use of a new method, unusual location or suicide by a very young person). · DON'T use explicit pictures disclosing method and location of the (attempted) suicide in the body of a news (the place, person, mean, suicide note)
Don't use photographs, video footage or social media links	· DON'T use explicit pictures disclosing method and location of the (attempted) suicide in the body of a news (the place, person, mean, suicide note)

Source: Own elaboration based on WHO and EUREGENAS guidelines.

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Following this research, some guides have emerged from the journalistic field to help journalists and the media, which echo these main international recommendations and which are articulated as a code of ethics for journalism professionals in Spain (APIB, 2018). The results of the present study should be considered before the self-regulation initiative mentioned.

However, little is known about whether these recommendations are reflected in the suicide news for most countries. According to the latest research, a study assessed adherence to the WHO media reporting recommendations for suicide stories published in the most influential newspaper and Internet media sources from 2003 to 2015 in China: "Government and the journalism industry should work together to improve media reporting of news about suicide in China" (Chu *et al.*, 2018, p. 1). His longitudinal study shows persistent weakness in the following areas: "Acknowledge the link between suicide and mental disorders like depression," "Discuss possible impacts on survivors and victim's families in terms of psychological suffering and stigma," and "Provide information about where to seek help." They also found that the WHO suicide media reporting recommendations were poorly and inconsistently applied by widely distributed newspaper and Internet-based media sources in China. No significant trends emerged to suggest changes in reporting practices from 2003 to 2015 (Chu *et al.*, 2018). Studies on the application of WHO recommendations in the Spanish press have also been carried out (Acosta Artiles *et al.*, 2017; Durán & Fernández-Beltrán, 2020; Garrido-Fabián *et al.*, 2018; Herrera Ramírez *et al.*, 2015), finding, in one way or another, repeated non-compliance with most of these recommendations.

3. Data and methods

3.1. *Data*

This study is focused on a case analysis of the "Blue Whale Challenge," and addresses the whole cycle of digital media coverage in Spain in 2017. The news stories were selected by means of purposive sampling (Riffe *et al.*, 2014). Following criteria of chronological relevance (Krippendorff, 1990), we tried to cover the most significant period of the BWC, from the first news that appeared in Spain at the beginning of March 2017 until the end of the cycle, at the end of July 2017, with the arrest of the person behind the challenge. Subsequently, some news items related to the BWC appeared on an ad hoc basis (Figure 1).

Given the breadth of digital media and Internet news dissemination platforms, the news stories were selected by means of purposive sampling (Riffe *et al.*, 2014), trying to locate the news with the most widely read digital media in Spain. To this end, the ranking developed by the *ComScore* digital marketing application, which serves as the main reference for the measurement of digital audiences, has been used. The 15 most visited digital media in April 2017 (at the beginning of the BWC media phenomenon) were selected, which, in descending order were: *El País*, *El Mundo*, *La Vanguardia*, *El Confidencial*, *ABC*, *20 Minutos*, *El Diario*, *OK Diario*, *La Voz de Galicia*, *El Español*, *Huffington Post*, *El Periódico*, *Público*, *Libertad Digital*, and *El Correo*.

The news items were then manually searched and selected through the specific search engines in the newspapers included in the samples. Inclusion criteria for the selection of news were established as: 1) contributing to main theme "Blue Whale Challenge"; 2) strictly informative focused, so opinions, blogs and reader's letters were disregarded; and 3) full text available on the website. The initial database was cross-checked for duplicate, incomplete stories or missing meeting the inclusion criteria. In total, 161 news items, from 15 different media sources, were included in the sample (Table 2).

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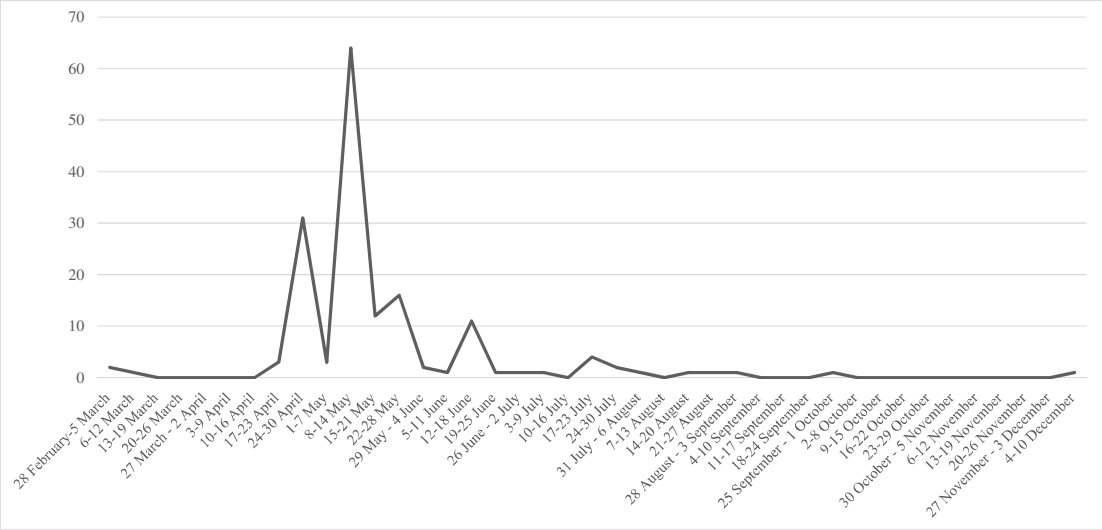
Table 2: News sample.

Publication media	n	%
20 Minutos	23	14.3
La Vanguardia	22	13.7
ABC	20	12.4
El Periódico	20	12.4
El Mundo	15	9.3
El Diario	10	6.2
El Correo	8	5.0
La Voz de Galicia	8	5.0
El Español	7	4.3
HuffPost	7	4.3
OK Diario	6	3.7
El Confidencial	5	3.1
El País	5	3.1
Público	4	2.5
Libertad Digital	1	0.6
Total	161	100

Source: Own elaboration.

This newsgathering exercise allowed the reconstruction of the BWC news cycle in Spain. This cycle begins in February and March 2017, when the first references appeared with regard to the game and its connection with adolescent suicide in foreign countries (mainly, Russia and Brazil). After a "latent period," the cycle runs two peaks during the months of April and May, in which the first cases of the BWC appeared in Spain: first case in Catalonia at the end of April 2017 and the following cases, in Mallorca and the Basque Country, two weeks later. These cases were followed by others in Andalusia and Madrid at the end of May. Gradually they petered out in the last week of June, when no further new entrants emerging in Spain. At the end of July that same year, the supposed "creator" of the game and other inciters were identified and arrested, and the news cycle finished (Figure 1).

Figure 1: News cycle on the Blue Whale game in Spain, 2017. Frequency of news per week (n=161).



Source: Own elaboration.

Analysis of the complete news cycle surrounding the BWC phenomena and the focus on Spain's main digital media help to support sampling validity (Krippendroff, 1990).

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3.2. *Method*

This research is based on the content analysis of digital press news. The analysis data are based on a mixed strategy, which examines both the qualitative and quantitative aspects of news content with a view to grasping the different dimensions of the phenomenon (Patton, 2002). Quantitative content analysis (Krippendroff, 1990; Riffe *et al.*, 2014) will allow us to determine the degree to which the media adhere to the international recommendations about suicide. To this end, and based on the main recommendations issued by the WHO guidelines (WHO, 2000) and EUREGENAS (Dumon & Porzky, 2003), a tool was created to verify the degree to which malpractice and good practices were incorporated into media coverage of suicide. On the one hand, this tool identifies the following indicators of malpractice: 1) Give a step-by-step description of method or by giving the name or detailed descriptions how to access that information; 2) The method used is explained; 3) Specific impacts of suicide are explained; 4) Place the word 'suicide' in the title; 5) Do not respect privacy of victims and relatives; 6) Mention of suicide circumstances and location; and 7) Publishing suicide notes. Furthermore, the following indicators of good practice were established: 1) Include the message that suicide is preventable; 2) Report warning lights and risk factors; 3) Highlight multifactorial causes; 4) Provide information about support services; 5) Report figures or numbers using reliable sources; 6) Discriminate between suicide and "attempted suicide"; and 7) Dispel myths. The results were included in an Excel database, where the appearance (1) or not (0) of an element was found in the news. This database was exported to the SPSS program for descriptive statistical analysis.

In a complementary way, qualitative content analysis (Bowen, 2009) was also developed, to identify the main elements of the media discourse surrounding the BWC. To this end, an initial scheme of codes was established based in the reference guides. This scheme was then expanded through the identification of emerging categories following the process of analysis (Taylor *et al.*, 2016). Particular consideration was given to the way in which news accounts explained and interpreted suicidal behaviour and whether they engaged in the use of alarmist, sensationalist and disturbing language and arguments. On the one hand, we examined the use of language and images, paying particular attention to the metaphors used (mainly the epidemic metaphor). We also identified the main discursive arguments that can be summarized as follows: a) Volume and globalized dissemination of the problem; b) Danger and inevitability of its effects; c) Vulnerability of the collective at risk (adolescent population); d) Lack of control over the Internet and social media; e) Criminalization of groups and practices (related with Internet use); f) Ways in which evidence is constructed (unconfirmed sources of information, confusion of contexts, and use of experts to legitimate alarm). The Atlas.ti v.7 software was used to facilitate the work of organizing and encoding the data. The tasks of codification, analysis and interpretation were carried out as part of a constant comparative process, and were mutually contrasted by the researchers (investigator triangulation) in order to support their validity (Johnson, 1997). The combination of qualitative and quantitative perspectives contributes to the verification and validation of the analysis (Patton, 2002).

4. Results

The results are structured in two sections. First, the main elements of malpractice expressed in quantitative outcomes and complemented by the qualitative analysis about alarmist factors for the social construction of the BWC. Second, the best examples of good media practice for the prevention of suicide have been presented.

4.1. *Malpractice in media coverage of suicide*

In the press reports analysed, malpractice is prevalent in the coverage of suicide cases, though this is worse in the case of specific news about the BWC phenomenon (Table 3).

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Table 3: Indicators of malpractice and images that accompany the news, in relation to media reporting of suicide. Percentage of total news (n=161).

Indicators of malpractice in text	n	%
Give a step-by-step description of method or by giving the name or detailed descriptions how to access that information	128	79.5
The method used is explained	80	49.7
Specific impacts of suicide are explained	77	47.8
Place the word 'suicide' in the title	57	35.5
Mention of suicide circumstances and location	46	28.6
Do not respect privacy of victims and relatives	37	23.0
Publishing suicide notes	12	7.5
Indicators of malpractice in images		
Injuries	60	37.3
Notebook with notes about BW method	21	13.0
Images of a blue whale (symbol of game)	15	9.3
Adolescents, in general	14	8.7
Social media (Facebook)	11	6.8
Driver responsible	11	6.8
Victims/Relatives	4	2.5
Police Message	4	2.5
School	4	2.5
Politicians	2	1.2
Others	3	1.9

Source: Own elaboration.

First, the main example of malpractice was the inclusion of explanations on how the victim accessed the method of suicide. The vast majority of the news (79.5%) specified how to reach and "play" the "challenge," clearly stating the steps to be taken on each type of social network (Facebook or WhatsApp groups) and including page images (6.8% of the news), providing the entire population with information on the access process.

Some headlines even explain "how to play" the "macabre game," as the main topic of the news: "What is the 'Blue Whale'? 6 Keys on the game of challenges that leads to suicide" (*El Periódico*, 04-28-2017). These instructions were accompanied, in 49.7% of the news, by images of notes in school notebooks with different challenges (at first, they appeared written in Russian and, later, in English and Spanish), almost always illustrated with pictures of whales (Figure 2). These images emphasized the "childishness" of the game, making it all the more alarming.

Figure 2: Examples of illustrations reproduced in the news about BW.

Source: Pictures from the news analyzed:
El Periódico (28/04/2017), *La Vanguardia* (11/05/2017), and *El Español* (13/05/2017).

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In addition to showing how to access the game, 49.7% of the news accurately described the method used in suicidal behaviour, either in an attempt or in an actual suicide. Beyond detailing the method and how to access it, information about the BWC "challenge" was added, also providing knowledge about its physical consequences (47.8% of the news) and explicit images of injuries (37.3%) (Table 3 and Figure 2).

Specifically, the news automatically reproduced photographs, taken directly from the Internet and digital media, without verification, for example, of an arm on a school notebook, with injuries that resembled the outline of a whale caused by a blade. This image was actually different from the injuries detailed in the text, in the cases published in Spain.

Another form of malpractice was the inclusion of the word "suicide" in the headline (35.5% of the news), which used generalizations, based on a small sample that required particular attention. The following malpractice is in relation to the disclosure of personal data. Furthermore, 23% of the total news about the BWC revealed personal data about the victims or their families, such as the name, neighbourhood, educational establishment and nationality of the young person who committed suicide or self-harm, and also other sensitive data that could lead to the identification of the person. The most damaging examples of the abuse of victim privacy involved posting photos (taken from Facebook) of the victims or their families. Medical information was also provided about minors who had self-harmed (for example, on their discharge from hospital or return to school). 28.6% of the news gave information describing where suicide attempts or suicidal behaviour occurred. A small percentage, since most took place in virtual, non-physical environments. Finally, 7.5% of the news included the suicide message that victims posted on social media, with the words "end" or "goodbye," accompanied by a picture or drawing of a BWC, published as the final testimony of the victim.

Qualitative analysis has allowed us to examine the elements of the alarmist media construction of the BWC phenomenon. The main malpractice observed was the sensationalist and alarmist treatment of suicide by most of the news and media analysed. To begin with, the use of alarmist language was widespread. The use of epidemic metaphors and expressions such as "viral," "deadly challenge" or "wave of suicides" were not only untrue (subsequently the media revealed that the BWC game was an Internet hoax), but actually, were more misleading, and led to stereotyping processes.

In addition, the exaggeration of unverified figures with affirmations such as "the lives of 130 young Russians have been claimed" (*20 Minutos*, 04-03-2017) further increased social panic about this media event. Moreover, the BWC phenomenon, when disseminated through social media and the Internet, became a danger of international proportions (it caused "global alarm"), where no borders existed to protect from a "viral" global spread. The news reported that this "challenge" started in Russia, and then went via countries in Latin America (Argentina, Brazil, Colombia ...) before "reaching Spain."

The fabricated origin of this "challenge" –supposedly a "Russian invention"– also led to reproducing cultural stereotypes about the spread of dangerous foreign practices. Furthermore, the conflation of what happened in Spain (a few unconfirmed cases of self-harm often based on rumours and fears of families and educators caused by what they read in the media) with what happened in other countries ("wave of suicides") contributed to even greater social concern.

Another alarmist issue pertains to the supposed unavoidable and deadly effects of the BWC once the adolescents have been in touch with the Internet challenge: "Various investigations reveal that children already know that they will have to die when they start the list of challenges" (*La Vanguardia*, 05-15-2017). This is one of the main sources of social alarm: the excessively simplistic explanation of adolescent suicide because of participating in an "internet game." Furthermore, it was dangerous for published news to present BWC as a "deadly game," "that instigates and leads to suicide" and say that several cases (even hundreds) had already been "recorded," even though the cases of detected suicides had not

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been verified by reliable sources. In an almost mechanical way, the idea was transmitted that "following the game" meant participating in the various challenges that lead inevitably to suicide.

Together with this, the media representations of "vulnerability," "immaturity" and "manipulation" of adolescent people contributes to a climate of fear and insecurity in the "digital age": "The lack of filters along with the immediacy provided by social media are allies in the battle of the Blue Whale game against parents and police. Emotionally immature, but experts in the digital age, young people can access without a trace content that promotes suicide" (*El Español*, 05-13-2017). Alarming expressions such as "suicide 2.0" or "live suicides" were used in headlines: 'Blue Whale': from gambling to suicide in a handful of 'clicks' (*El Correo, 15*-05-2017) or "Facebook. Live suicides" (*Público*, 27-05-2017). Moreover, social media contributed to the rapid spread of the "fashionable game" the "viral challenge," "that spread like wildfire." This impression of danger was heightened when it was directly linked to the use of the Internet, giving the idea of a "hidden," "secret," virtual world full of danger, beyond parental control. This alarmist language was also accompanied by images of a blue whale (symbol of the "game") or photographs of the social media and profiles of the victims involved, recreating a virtual setting for the suicide (Figure 2) that adolescents and young people could easily access to find examples and methods of self-harm.

The BWC represents a new type of danger related with the risks of the Internet and the manifestation of new forms of criminality. The BWC was also linked to Internet pages and groups that promoted suicide ("death groups," "suicide channels"). The alleged existence of virtual perpetrators and "inciters" (the game "curators") and the establishment of "organized" groups that threatened relatives, fed into the climate of menace and defencelessness. That is, the BWC was seen as a threat from organized crime groups using the anonymity afforded them by the Internet.

Another fundamental element to understand the construction of social alarm around the BWC pertains to the way in which evidence about the information provided in the news was grounded. A lot of news about the BWC was often accompanied by references to unverified or dubious sources, such as foreign online media, which would later be questioned for their unauthenticated information. In spite of this, the inclusion of testimonies by local experts –such as police officers, psychologists, educators– added a sheen of veracity to the information channelled through the media, legitimated the gravity of the social alarm reported, and at the same time connected a global threat with the immediate context. Consultation of more reliable sources of information such as suicide prevention and survivor care associations or the security forces, led to the rebuttal of many of these cases and questioned their link to the BWC phenomenon. More seriously, when finally, some of the media checked the veracity of such sources of this alarmist fabrication, they concluded that it was an "urban legend" or "virtual bubble" that social media and the media had amplified worldwide.

4.2. *Good praxis in suicide coverage*

Despite widespread malpractice in digital media, it is worth mentioning the existence of a few examples of good practice found mainly in the news with a more general focus on the problem of suicide, and less so in those centred on the alleged BWC cases (Table 4).

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Table 4: Indicators of good practice in relation to media reporting of suicide.

Indicators	n	%
Include the message that suicide is preventable	41	25.5
Report warning lights and risk factors	35	21.7
Highlight multifactorial causes	17	10.6
Provide information about support services	17	10.6
Report figures or numbers using reliable sources	14	8.7
Discriminate between suicide and "attempted suicide"	9	5.6
Dispel myths	1	0.6
Total	77	100

Source: Own elaboration.

The most common good practice is the transmission of the message that suicide could be prevented, and the provision of various prevention solutions (25.5%). Many of these messages were aimed at families and based on improving communication with children and parental control over their Internet use. There are also frequent references to prevention activities in schools, although they focus on deterring bullying and not specifically on suicide.

Furthermore, 21.7% of the news reported on risk indicators and warning signs. This news usually included statements from experts in psychology and psychiatry, or non-governmental organization working in direct contact with adolescents at risk of suicide, an important source of information for the prevention of suicidal or self-injurious behaviour. Another important media coverage norm for suicide is to avoid attributing it to a single cause. Few news sources (10.6%) delved into the multiple causality of suicide, incorporating other factors, beyond the BWC or social media, such as the existence of harassment in school, cyberbullying, family abuse or mental health problems. However, there are few news items that include information on aid resources (10.6%). The majority of these resources consist of help lines run by suicide prevention and survivor care associations (ANAR Foundation and Teléfono de la Esperanza, "Hope Helpline"). Below is an example of a message showing that suicide is preventable and that help resources exist:

> "I'm about to kill myself." These are the words that Lorena pronounced when she called Teléfono de la Esperanza (http: www.telefonodelaesperanza.org/). Her stomach was full of a mix of two bottles of pills, but a last-minute thought caused her to back track. "Everything looked hopeless to me and I thought that this was the only solution, but as I did it, I thought of everyone in my life, even though I had said goodbye to them without their knowing it," Lorena told *Público*. An ambulance went to her house immediately and took her to hospital, but the actual healing process takes much longer (*Público*, 27-05-2017).

A very small minority (8.7% of the news) took account of other recommendations on using statistics and other relevant data to contextualize the problem of suicide and refute unfounded information and alarmist rumours. The limited statistical and contextual data provided came mainly from official statistics on causes of death and cases handled by specialized associations. Another singularly infrequently followed recommendation (only 5.6%) is to clearly differentiate between suicide attempts and suicide. Finally, questioning and eliminating myths about suicide was the least used element of good practice (0.6%), for example:

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> "People with suicidal tendencies are not crazy or attentions seekers," stresses the psychologist: "We cannot look for a simplistic reason to understand why a person reaches this extreme, it is a mixture of many factors." [...] Another stigma on people who have suicidal tendencies is that talking about it encourages other people to decide to do it (*Público*, 27-05-17).

It is worth mentioning that though they were few and far between, there were attempts at self-criticism and reflection on the role of the media in suicide coverage. Very few news items questioned the dubious information, often taken from the Internet and social media, and criticized the prevailing way of reporting on BWC and its potential imitative or contagion effects. One article does however describe the BWC phenomenon as "an extraordinary example of the unnecessary danger that can be caused by exaggerated news and unchecked figures" (*El País*, 14-05-2017).

5. Discussion and conclusions

Analysis of the BWC case allows us to examine and reflect on the role of the media in covering socially sensitive issues that are of vital importance in public health prevention strategies, such as suicide. This research aims to delve into the concrete dynamics and expressions that affect a specific phenomenon within its context (Yin, 2002). The incorporation of a qualitative approach to the analysis of the news throughout the media cycle allows us to identify textual and visual elements to be avoided or promoted in a responsible treatment of suicide and other health problems (Wang *et al.*, 2019). Traditionally, the Spanish media have avoided talking about this issue so as not to provoke the Werther effect (Phillips, 1974). However, this denial of the problem not only hinders its prevention but also favours biased, stereotyped and alarmist coverage of suicide as a consequence of a lack of resources to adequately address the problem, without even considering the implementation of those recommendations that would lead to the opposite effect Papageno effect (Niederkrotenthaler *et al.*, 2010). The paper presented here reveals that the Spanish online media largely ignore WHO and EUREGENAS international recommendations on what to avoid when reporting suicides. These results are in line with other analyses of news on suicide in the Spanish press which, contrary to expectations, are repeatedly maintained over time (Acosta Artiles *et al.*, 2017; Durán & Fernández-Beltrán, 2020; Garrido-Fabián *et al.*, 2018; Herrera Ramírez *et al.,* 2015; Muñoz & Sánchez, 2013) and other countries that concluded that WHO guidelines have not been taken on board (Chu *et al.*, 2018; Utterson *et al.*, 2017). That is to say, simplistic explanations are given, methods are named and detailed, no data is provided on the victim's mental health, risk indicators or aid resources are not reported on, and alternatives to suicide are not highlighted. All this might encourage precipitating factors leading to imitative behaviour, especially among the most vulnerable, youngest age group of the population (Stack, 2005; Yang, Tsai, Yang, Shia, Fuh *et al.*, 2013; Zahl & Hawton, 2004).

In the BWC case, this malpractice is based on the repeated use of highly sensationalist and alarmist language and perspective. The quantification and exaggeration of the problem was highlighted in the news, using disturbing expressions such as "wave," "epidemic" or "viral spread," which not only served to amplify a phenomenon that barely represented a dozen cases of self-harm in Spain (in which the link to BW and suicide remained unverified), but also contributed to sensationalizing the issue. Furthermore, the staging of suicide, or the possibility of considering it a "game" was greatly aggravated by the simple normalization of the phenomenon, calling it a "challenge."

In addition, and specially in digital media, the use of images of injuries (accompanied by links to pages in social networking sit such as Facebook), reference to victims all over the world and handwritten suicide messages, contributed to reaffirming and making the "game" more attractive, and helping to spread information about access to it, as WHO has already warned (2017). In the news analysed, detailed descriptions of suicidal behaviour were given,

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based on texts and images that amongst other things explicitly detailed the method, form of access and steps to follow. For the media, the BW manner and method were unusual, atypical suicides, out of the ordinary, all the more attractive because of their bizarreness and likely to further perpetuate erroneous information on suicide. In their reporting, the media did not cover suicide per se, but certain suicides that were newsworthy.

The still rare examples of good practice in the Spanish online press focused on general news about the problem of suicide when covering the BWC phenomenon, and not so much on cases identified as related to BWC. These findings are consistent with other researches which has pointed out the critical importance of media reporting on suicide, especially in the case of celebrities (Myhre & Walby, 2021), who repeatedly ignore recommendations aimed at causing just the opposite, the Papageno effect. In this news, the main recommendation followed was to report on risk indicators and warning signs, followed by the indication that suicide had multiple causes and was preventable. Some news also provided information about aid resources. However, few items included data and reliable sources that distinguished between attempted and actual suicide, or questioned the usual myths about suicide.

Evidence of the reduction of suicides linked to the implementation of these recommendations by the media, raises the need for a debate on the social responsibility of the media in suicide prevention and how to ensure the implementation of such recommendations (Niederkrotenthaler *et al.*, 2010). In this regard, it is worth highlighting the existence of several manuals (among them, the one developed in Spain resulting from the EUREGENAS project) on suicide prevention, aimed specifically at the media and underscoring that implementation can bring benefits for both professionals and the wider population.

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